

ARTISTIC ANCESTORS

Roger Davies

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One of the fifth great grandfathers of Jane Davies was Philip Woollett, a flax dresser, who was born in Maidstone, Kent in 1705. He was the head of a prestigious artistic family.

Flax is a fibrous plant from which linen is made, but the process of converting it into linen thread, called dressing, is long and laborious. The flax is first cut and dried in the sun for several weeks, then soaked in a pond for ten days and dried again. It is then beaten to release the fibres, and combed repeatedly to separate them. The fibres can then be spun into thread, the raw material from which linen is woven.

The industry was introduced to Maidstone in the seventeenth century by a group of Walloons, who had fled from persecution in what is now French-speaking Belgium.

Philip made a good living from his work, and with his wife Ann had nine children, of whom only four, William, John, Ann and Mary, survived beyond childhood. Philip was not in the best of health, as the dust from his work had given him asthma. He was one of a group of twelve local Maidstone tradesmen, who met regularly for a drink in the evening at the Ship tavern in the town. Sometimes the group clubbed together to purchase a lottery ticket.

Lotteries were a regular feature in the eighteenth century. They were used to fund good causes, such as the construction of a new bridge over the Thames, and even military campaigns. The establishment of the British Museum was funded by a lottery. This is a typical lottery ticket of the period.



Tickets were expensive, and beyond the resources of an ordinary individual, so people often clubbed together to share the cost. A full ticket could cost £10, at a time when a labourer would only earn

perhaps £15 in a year. Philip and his friends were fortunate on one occasion to share a win of £5000, equivalent to half a million pounds today.

Philip used his share of the winnings to give up flax dressing and rent a tavern, the Turk's Head, in Rose Yard in the centre of Maidstone. His eldest son William began to show some artistic skill, scratching a drawing of a turk's head into a pewter tankard at his new home. A turk's head, shown below, is a decorative knot, sometimes used to make woggles.



Philip apprenticed his son to an engraver, and in 1750 at the age of 15, William was sent to his new apprentice master in London. He had already shown early enthusiasm for drawing; fourteen drawings of birds and animals by the twelve-year-old Woollett are in Maidstone Museum. He served his apprenticeship and in 1758 became a freeman of the Goldsmiths' Company. According to a friend he was *'rather below the middle stature, and extremely simple and unpretending in manner and demeanour'*.

Apprentices were not allowed to marry, but as soon as he was freed, he married Hannah Morris. They took an attic apartment in Long's Court, St Martin's Lane, London before moving in 1768 to a house nearby in Green Street. They had five children, all of whom died in infancy.

By now Woollett had won a reputation, chiefly as a draughtsman and secondarily as an engraver. His first signed prints were views of country houses and gardens, engraved from his own drawings. They are elegant and lucid and brought him a reputation for handling landscape that he retained throughout his life. The direction of his career changed in 1760 when he was employed to engrave a copy

of *Niobe*, a painting by Richard Wilson RA. The engraving is shown below.



Woollett employed a new style of engraving using dense tonal hatching superimposed on boldly etched outlines, and even continental critics recognized it as a masterpiece. The print was widely credited with being instrumental in raising the reputation of English engraving to parity with French, and cemented Woollett's reputation as a master.

Each of his prints represented months, sometimes years, of intense work for his studio and the completion of a plate was cause for celebration. It is reported that on such occasions he would line up his family on the landing for them all to give three cheers and would then let off a small cannon from the roof of his house.

After the death of his first wife, Woollett married Elizabeth Weston. The marriage was prolific, producing five sets of twins and one of triplets, but few of their children survived beyond infancy, and only three survived their father.

Woollett was now moving in exalted circles in the art world, and was a close friend of the animal painter George Stubbs. William Blake, the author of *Jerusalem*, was critical of Woollett's work, perhaps because of the failure of Blake's own career as a reproductive

engraver.

In 1772 Woollett began to engrave Benjamin West's painting *The Death of General Wolfe*. Just before publication, he presented a proof impression to George III and as a result was appointed Engraver to the King.



The print, above, proved vastly profitable and led to a series of similar publications. In 1782 Woollett moved to a new house, 1 North Street, off Charlotte Street, in what had become the most fashionable quarter for artists in London.

At the age of 50, and at the height of his fame, Woollett died on 23 May 1785 at his home from the delayed effects of an injury sustained while playing Dutch pins, an early form of skittles. He was buried on 28 May in Old St Pancras churchyard, and, in the words of a contemporary newspaper report, '*was attended to the ground by a considerable number of his pupils and friends, whose concern for the death of so worthy and benevolent a man, was expressed in a manner which deeply affected even the vulgar who were present*'.

At the time of his death Woollett was widely considered to be Europe's best living engraver, and one of the best since Albrecht Dürer. His prints are represented in all major British and European collections.

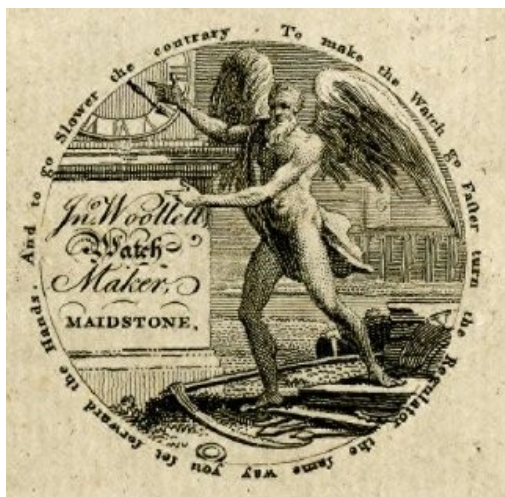
His gravestone bore a pencilled inscription -

*"Here Woollett rests, expecting to be sav'd.
He graved well, but is not well engrav'd."*

He has a substantial monument in the west cloister of Westminster Abbey, and at least ten different images of him survive. The central drawing is a self-portrait.



John Woollett, Philip's second son, became a watch and clock maker, and established a successful business first in Maidstone and later in Red Lion Street, Holborn, London. His brother William engraved watchpapers for him; elaborate circular images with instructions on how to adjust a fob watch, designed to fit inside the watch case.



Ann Woollett was Philip's elder daughter. By the time she reached marriageable age, her eldest brother William was well established in his career, and had as a student the draughtsman and engraver Benjamin Thomas Pouncy.

Ann married Benjamin at St Martin in the Fields, London, in 1772. Benjamin was assistant librarian at Lambeth Palace, and the pair lived in Lambeth. Although not a particularly skilful draughtsman, Pouncy produced topographical watercolours of the highest quality. His *View of Margate Harbour*, in the British Museum, is regarded as particularly fine.



The last of Philip and Ann Woollett's surviving children was their younger daughter Mary. She too seems to have been introduced to the world of London artists by her brother William Woollett, and there met and married John Luff Barenger, a painter who went on to exhibit his watercolours of butterflies and insects at the Royal Academy. They lived in Kentish Town, London. Two of their children, Samuel and James, achieved considerable success in the art world.

Samuel Barenger was christened Major Samuel Barenger at St Pancras Old Church in 1776. He may have been embarrassed by his first name, having no military connection, and was known throughout his life as Samuel, or occasionally M Samuel Barenger. He was an accomplished engraver, specialising in architectural subjects. He produced an extensive series of engravings of the new buildings that were gracing London in the early nineteenth century, including a number showing the newly built Regent Street.



James Barenger, born in Kentish Town and baptised at St Pancras in 1781, was even more successful. Beginning as a landscape artist, he went on to paint horses, dogs and other animals, as well as hunting scenes. From 1807, at the age of 28, he exhibited at the Royal Academy. At this stage he was living with his father in Kentish Town, but later moved to Camden Town, and then to Tattersalls Yard in Grosvenor Place, the home of a number of well-known sporting artists. He went on to exhibit 48 paintings at the Royal Academy and eight at the British Institution. Three of his animal paintings are shown below.



He acquired numerous wealthy and aristocratic patrons, and his pictures were also engraved for a number of sporting publications. As well as painting, Barenger bred pointer dogs, and his paintings exhibit a detailed knowledge of animal anatomy. He died in 1831 and was buried in the churchyard of St George, Hanover Square. It is from James Barenger that Jane is directly descended.

Philip Woollett lived all his life in his home town of Maidstone, but his family provided him with a substantial national artistic legacy.

Roger Davies, Worthing, 2014, revised 2018